

## CROESUS' PRIORITY: HERODOTUS 1.5.3

Michael Lloyd (University College Dublin)

Herodotus begins his history with an account of various unverifiable stories about the beginning of hostility between Asia and Europe (1.1–5), which he then dismisses and announces his intention of beginning the history proper with Croesus: ‘the first man I know of to commit injustice against the Greeks’ (τὸν δὲ οἶδα αὐτὸς πρῶτον ὑπάρξαντα ἀδίκων ἔργων ἐς τοὺς Ἕλληνας). Croesus’ significance is then described in the following terms: ‘he was the first barbarian we know of (βαρβάρων πρῶτος τῶν ἡμεῖς ἴδμεν) to exact tribute from some Greek cities and make friends with others ... before Croesus all Greeks were free’ (6.2–3). Herodotus does not however come on to Croesus until chapter 26, but begins by sketching the background to his rule: Heraclid kings (ch. 7), Gyges (8–14), Mermnad kings between Gyges and Croesus (15–25).

A contradiction noted by Jacoby is that these introductory chapters show that Croesus was not in fact the first Lydian king to subjugate Greek cities: Gyges takes Colophon (14.4), Ardys takes Priene (15), Alyattes takes Smyrna (16.2).<sup>1</sup> Jacoby thought that this shows that there was originally an independent Croesus logos, which Herodotus did not absorb properly into the rest of his history. F. Hellmann replied to Jacoby that the important thing about Croesus was that he was responsible for ‘the first systematic subjugation requiring the payment of tribute’ (‘die erste systematische Unterwerfung bis zum Tributpflichtigkeit’), whereas the earlier attacks can be classified as mere ‘plundering from raids’ (ἐξ ἐπιδρομῆς ἀρπαγή, 6.3).<sup>2</sup> Hellmann was in turn criticized by B. Shimron, who argued that the earlier kings were evidently engaged on a policy of subjugation, albeit less successful than that of Croesus, that they would naturally have imposed tribute on the cities which they conquered, and that the long siege of Miletus (chh. 17–22) can hardly be described as ‘plundering from raids’ (a term applied by Herodotus to the Cimmerian invasion, and not to the activities of the Mermnad kings).<sup>3</sup> Shimron therefore proposed a different type of interpretation, stressing Herodotus’ use of the verb ‘know’ (οἶδα, 5.3; ἴδμεν, 6.2): he does not deny that Greek cities may have been subjugated before Croesus, but what he is saying is that Croesus is the first barbarian of whom he can say with certainty that he subjugated Greek cities. Shimron observes that, unless he has exceptionally reliable sources, Herodotus only uses such expressions of certainty when dealing with events no earlier than the generation of his grandparents: he can thus use ‘we know’ (ἴδμεν, 14.2) of Gyges’ offerings at Delphi, which are there to be seen, but not of his exploits, nor of those of Croesus’ other predecessors.

Shimron’s theory appears to fit 5.3, where Herodotus contrasts what the Persians and Phoenicians say with what he himself knows, but it does not fit the expanded statement of Croesus’ priority at 6.2–3, where Herodotus says that before Croesus all Greeks were free. If Shimron were correct, then what Herodotus would have said would have been something like ‘there may have been aggressors before Croesus but I cannot be sure about them’. He may indeed sometimes distinguish between myth and history in the way suggested by Shimron, but nevertheless he does not tacitly exclude myth when making general statements. Thus when he says that Polycrates was the first Greek ‘of whom we know’ (τῶν ἡμεῖς ἴδμεν, 3.122.2) to have

<sup>1</sup> R. E. Suppl. 2 (1913), 338.

<sup>2</sup> F. Hellmann, *Herodots Kroisoslogos* (Berlin, 1934), 26.

<sup>3</sup> B. Shimron, ‘πρῶτος τῶν ἡμεῖς ἴδμεν’, *Eranos* 71 (1973), 45–51.

a thalassocracy, he explicitly excludes Minos and any predecessors that he may have had, and reiterates that Polycrates was the first historical figure to do so. Similarly, when he says that Xerxes' army was much the biggest 'of which we know' (τῶν ἡμεῖς ᾔδμεν, 7.20.2), he does not automatically exclude the mythical expedition of the Atreidae against Troy from consideration (even though he can only estimate its size 'from what is said'), but says that Xerxes' army was bigger than that too. If Shimron were correct, therefore, Herodotus would have excluded the earlier Mermnad kings explicitly, and would certainly not make the flat statement that before Croesus all Greeks were free.

There is no need, however, to resort to Jacoby's view that Herodotus has failed to integrate the Croesus logos into the history as a whole. What we have here is a common feature of paratactic style, whereby a statement to which there are only rather trivial exceptions is made first without any qualification, and the exceptions are then stated without any 'but' or 'except'. Examples of this are cited by Colin Macleod in his note on *Iliad* 24.498, including Thucydides 1.97.2: 'everyone before me omitted this period ... and the one man who did handle it, Hellanicus, did so cursorily and inaccurately'.<sup>4</sup> Herodotus thus begins by making his most general claim about Croesus' priority at 5.3, when he says that Croesus is the first man he knows of to commit injustice against the Greeks. He then narrows down this assertion at 6.2–3, when he says that Croesus was the first barbarian to exact tribute from some Greek cities and make friends with others. Finally, he shows at 14.4–16.2 that Croesus had some precedent even for the activities specified at 6.2–3. Herodotus can express himself in this manner because the attacks by Croesus' predecessors were relatively unimportant, but his narrative makes it clear that they were no different in nature from those of Croesus himself. Herodotus wanted, for reasons too complicated to go into here, to begin his history with Croesus. It was therefore natural that he should have justified this in the most decisive way possible by stating what was new and different about Croesus in a way that makes clear his relevance to the theme of the whole work, the hostility between East and West.

---

<sup>4</sup> C. W. Macleod (ed.), *Homer: Iliad XXIV* (Cambridge, 1982), 129.